DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 558 JC 960 114

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TITLE	The Role of the Rural Community College in Rural Community Development. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, Los Angeles, CA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-JC-96-02
PUB DATE	Jan 96
CONTRACT	RI93002003
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Education; Adult Literacy; *Community Colleges; Community Development; Educationally Disadvantaged; Educational Opportunities; *Educational Technology; *Illiteracy; Partnerships in Education; *Rural Development; Rural Education; Rural Schools; *School Community Relationship; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Rural community colleges have an important role to play in the economic development of their communities and in preparing community members for technological, economic, and societal changes. Community-based programming (CBP) is one tool utilized by colleges to become aware of local problems by collaborating with citizens, leaders, and community-based organizations and agencies to identify and seek resolutions to major issues in the community. The CBP model has been effectively employed to combat illiteracy, one of the most pervasive problems facing rural communities. Specific strategies employed by the Appalachia Regional Steering Committee to address the problem of illiteracy in its region include the following: (1) policy strategies, such as identifying and working with community leaders to become involved in community development activities; (2) dispositional strategies, including promoting equal opportunity for rural adults and establishing peer support and career planning activities; (3) situational strategies, such as lobbying for reductions in transportation and educational costs; and (4) institutional strategies, including the development of cooperative partnerships at all levels. Finally, another pressing issue facing rural communities is educational access. Rural community colleges are providing technological learning systems such as distance education programs and instructional television broadcast channels to increase educational and employment opportunities. (TGI)

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Digest

January 1996 EDO-JC-96-02

The Role of the Rural Community College in Rural Community Development

by Jonathan D. Holub

For many U.S. citizens in rural communities, the standard of living and the prospects of a better future are diminished by a number of circumstances. As Gillett-Karam states, "the rural United States is known by a set of identifiers that include the words low, slow and high—low population density, low total populations, low per-capita income, low levels of educational attainment, slow job growth, high poverty, high unemployment, and high rates of illiteracy"(1995, p.43). These conditions persist and are, in fact, exacerbated due to the rapid and overwhelming changes in the national and global economy. The movement from a rural, agrarian society to an urban industrial society was completed long ago. Today, there is the additional burden of surviving in the newly emerging market system, a system that has catapulted society into a global arena, not only for corporate entities, but for the general population as well. The combination of these factors has served to further isolate rural communities from the benefits that may be afforded them if they had greater access to what the current economic trends have to offer.

This digest focuses on the ways in which rural community colleges are serving their surrounding areas in an effort to reverse negative trends and prepare community members for the technological, economic and societal changes that are emerging at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Community-Based Programming

Community-based programming (C-BP) is an effective tool utilized by community colleges to become familiarized with and responsive to the problems facing their varying constituencies. Community-based programming is defined as "a cooperative process that involves a series of processual tasks in which the community college serves as the leader and catalyst in effecting collaboration among the people, their leaders, and other community-based organizations and agencies within its service area in identifying and seeking resolution to major issues that are of critical concern to the community and its people" (Boone, 1992, p.2). Among the more successful programs utilizing the C-BP approach is Project ACCLAIM (Academy for Community College Leadership Advancement, Innovation and Modeling). This program, directed by Edgar Boone and operated by North Carolina State University, is built on the C-BP model. One important aspect addressed by the model is the recognition of relevant issues facing a rural community. Once an issue is identified, the model outlines a series of processual tasks designed to tackle it. The complete processual task list, as developed by Boone, is as follows:

1. The staff must critically examine the college's mission, philosophy, goals, and organizational structure to determine if it is prepared, both philosophically and practically, to assume the role of a community-based institution.

2. The staff must increase their knowledge of the social, cultural, economic, and political environments of the service area.

3. The staff must establish a mechanism, such as an environmental scanning committee, for scanning the external environment.

4. The issues identified by the environmental scanning process should be ranked and confirmed as important by both formal and informal community leaders who are not members of the scanning committee but who have a vested interest in seeing issues resolved.

5. The college staff should analyze, identify, and map the publics within their service region who are directly affected by each issue identified by the environmental scan. The goal is to identify those groups and individual leaders who will play key roles in resolving an issue, as well as those who have any vested interests in their resolution.

6. The staff as catalysts can initiate a dialogue among community leaders and others involved in a given issue.

7. The college staff provides leadership for this coalition in developing, coordinating, carrying out, and evaluating the plan for addressing the community problem.

8. The plan requires that coalition leaders report to their respective constituencies on the progress of the plan and the result achieved to date.

9. Those elements of the plan to which the college has committed resources must be incorporated into its institutional planning and budgeting processes. (Boone and Vaughan, 1993, pp.1-2)

Boone also advises that any lessons that have been learned in resolving the issue at hand should be applied to the processual tasks as other issues emerge.

Illiteracy—A Fundamental Issue

James Sprunt Community College, a rural institution in North Carolina has participated in Project ACCLAIM. After completing a C-BP training program, the college determined that the high rate of illiteracy should be ranked as one of the most serious issues facing the county (Reichard, 1995). Illiteracy is one of the pervasive problems that face rural communities and disables people in search of economic and educational fulfillment. This is not only a detriment to the individual, but has a significant, negative impact on the community (Sullins, Volger, and Mays, 1987). It is widely recognized that in order to make any progress in rural areas, illiteracy needs to be addressed and solutions must be presented.

The Appalachian region has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the country. An Appalachian Regional Steering Committee developed the following strategies designed to help community colleges address the issue of rural illiteracy (Sullins, Volger, and Mays, 1987, p.51). The strategies are arranged according to the respective area they address:

Policy Strategies

- Identify and work with community opinion leaders and obtain a commitment from those leaders to work together to identify educational deficiencies of the rural adult.

- Prepare leaders to train others to become involved in community development activities.
- Form community coalitions who will influence legislators as well as identify and obtain outside resources.
- Utilize every possible means to obtain visibility for the area.

Dispositional Strategies

- Conduct a public relations campaign promoting equal opportunity for rural adults.
- Encourage institutions to establish peer support groups, provide career planning activities, establish orientation programs, and develop non punitive grading systems.

Situational Strategies

- Lobby for legislation to allow deductions for the costs of transportation and child care so as not to penalize those on public assistance.
- Form cooperative agreements with public schools for joint use of buses or establish college transportation systems.
- Lobby for reduced student-paid costs for public postsecondary education and to improve the present student-aid system.

Institutional Strategies

- Identify and publicize model cooperative partnerships.
- Develop cooperative partnership agreements between and among agencies at all levels.
- Establish a tie between institutional accountability for cooperation and institutional funding.
- Provide incentives to individual faculty and to institutions to encourage their serving rural students.
- Capitalize on existing technology such as satellite systems and cable television to provide access to rural areas.

Technological Learning Systems

Access is another issue facing rural communities. Although potential students are quite willing and ready to engage in study, rural isolation prevents some of them from pursuing further study. A 1989 survey of 672 students enrolled in associate degree courses in the Community College of Maine's distance education program indicated that the location of the college course was the most important factor in the decision to enroll (MacBrayne, 1995). That is, an isolated student would likely forego pursuing studies if a class or program were not made easily accessible. Granting access to these students is achieved through technology-based systems such as computer links, cable television and video technology. Many rural programs have already had great success in utilizing these techniques. Lackawanna Junior College, serving the population of Northeastern Pennsylvania, has used a teleteaching/training system in order to increase employment opportunities for its constituencies. By using technological links between isolated students and businesses, the college is attempting to close the gap between training and opportunity and to prevent a well-documented career drain that faces the region (Small/Rural CCC, 1991).

The North Country Community College, located in the Adirondack Mountains, services two of the most sparsely populated and poorest counties in New York State. Three technological tools are used by the college to increase economic opportunity for disadvantaged adult, vocational students: high grade voice transmission using directional and desktop microphones, electronic blackboards that simultaneously transmit instructor writing to all remote sites, and facsimiles that transmit tests and course materials.

Another positive example of technological learning systems is being used by Iowa Lakes Community College. Through use of the federally funded Instructional Television Fixed Service (ITFS) broadcast channels, the rural population of this area now has access to a wide variety of educational opportunities that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. The system uses two channels for live, college-level courses and one for live high school credit classes. The fourth channel is reserved for live teleconferencing, business and industry activities and general overflow from the other channels (Small/Rural CCC, 1991).

These examples demonstrate the effect that technological advancement is having on the educational livelihood of rural communities. By utilizing these technologies, people in these settings are benefiting twofold: they are receiving much of the training that is necessary for an increasingly competitive economy; and they are being introduced to and working with the tools of current technology which is, in its own right, an emerging form of literacy.

Conclusions

Despite the many difficult issues facing rural communities, much is being done to enhance the opportunities of this population. Community colleges, by taking a lead role in community development, help serve the needs of their constituencies and improve the standard of living. Future efforts must center around fostering programs that enhance the quality of life by offering people the tools that will allow them to enjoy the benefits that a quality education and training can provide. This is currently being achieved through the merging of outreach programs and technology. In order to further this symbiotic relationship between the community college and the community-at-large, further bonds must be established between the colleges and external interests located in their service areas. When these bonds are strengthened benefits will occur to better serve the people of rural communities and assist them in adjusting to a rapidly changing world.

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